



TRIEC

Toronto Region Immigrant
Employment Council

New Realities. New Opportunities.

Skilled immigrants in the labour market

Report on employer focus group in the GTA

Background

In summer 2005, TRIEC's Intergovernmental Relations Committee (IGR) held consultations with employers in the Toronto Region to gauge their views on skilled immigrants in the labour market. Participants were convened by the boards of trade in the City of Toronto and Peel Region and by the Planning and Development Services Department in York Region. Prior to the consultations employers were provided with a backgrounder on the integration of skilled immigrants into the GTA labour market. The target employers were small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) with 50 – 500 employees. Facilitators were also provided with a backgrounder on TRIEC, IGR and some success stories on the government funded programs used by employers.

The format of each region's consultations varied. In Toronto, employers participated in a focus group at the Toronto Board of Trade. TRIEC held individual meetings with a few additional employers who were unable to attend the focus group but were interested in expressing their opinions. The Boards of Trade in Brampton and Mississauga responded to the questions as employers, and undertook outreach and direct employer response through a survey prepared by TRIEC, which is still in process. In York Region officials from the Planning and Development Services Department met individually with employers and provided a summary from those meetings.

The purpose of the employer focus group was twofold:

1. to get employers' perspectives on the performance of existing government-supported programs that facilitate the entry of skilled immigrants into the Canadian labour market; and,
2. to explore new ideas for potential designs of program development focused on solutions suggested by employers.

SMEs across industry sectors were invited to share their experiences of using government programs that support the integration of skilled immigrants. The consultations have generated suggestions for improving current programs and solutions to the challenges employers face in hiring and integrating skilled immigrants in their workplaces.

Summary of Consultations

- Generally employers would like to hire more skilled immigrants in their workplace. They welcome the supports and incentives offered by the government and other parties.
- There is a need to increase employer awareness about the availability and benefits of programs that promote the entry of skilled immigrants into the labour market.
- Employers felt that the government must respond to the needs of employers in the selection of immigrants who enter Canada, with particular focus in on skill set and vetting of qualifications.
- There are opportunities for governments or other publicly funded organisations to improve the quality of the skills that immigrants bring, but they must be responsive to the needs of

employers.

- Communication and language proficiency in a business environment are among the biggest issues for employers.
- Employers stated that SMEs have more flexibility to hire immigrants and visible minorities than do large companies because they have less bureaucracy in their organisational structure.
- Companies do not require, but may utilise, hiring subsidies. However, they would resist quotas. Employers are in favour of subsidies, but in their absence they would hire anyway based on their needs. If quotas were present, employers would be less flexible in hiring.
- School boards, training boards and private trainers were identified as useful intermediaries used by employers in delivering language training and supports for immigrants. Community colleges were mentioned in a few cases, but more in a recruitment context, as sources of trained people.
- Boards of trade may be positioned as intermediaries between the government and employers in disseminating information on programs that promote the integration of skilled immigrants into the labour market.
- Canada Manpower used to be more involved in identifying and responding to employers' needs and concerns. Now HRSDC does more policy development as opposed to assisting employers directly with hiring and training immigrants.

Focus Group – Employer Responses

Have you hired a skilled immigrant or not, and why?

- Many employers have hired skilled immigrants and have been very pleased with their work. Immigrants are seen to have a better work ethic, greater dedication and love for their work than other Canadians, and are well-educated and hard-working employees.
- New immigrants are mature and have the necessary professional knowledge and skills, but face difficulties in understanding different language nuances when undertaking assignments.
- Most employers are satisfied with technical competence and abilities of new immigrants to do the job they are hired for. However, soft skills, language competency and communication with other workers are often significant issues that surface after hiring.
- Some employers have a difficult time convincing the leadership of their company to focus on new immigrants as a talent pool because of past experiences with applicants presenting false credentials. It is a challenge for employers to verify the education and work experience of new immigrants and they would prefer to rely on referring agencies.
- Other employers have come across immigrants during the recruitment process, but did not hire them because positions required strong communications skills and customer service expertise. Language communication was seen as a barrier to hiring skilled immigrants.

How did you find the skilled immigrants that you hired and how did they find you?

- Most have hired skilled immigrants through word of mouth or internal references. Some value the networks within immigrant communities (individuals) as a good pipeline. SMEs do not have dedicated human resources staff to look outside the company for recruitment. When a skilled immigrant from a given community is a successful employee, they will be used as a referral source. If SMEs had information from the government on where else they can hire from they would like to know more, but employers of this size do not have the capacity to initiate or look for other hiring options.

- Some employers have hired through agencies that run government funded programs. Microskills was an agency mentioned by two different employers in consultations in Toronto. They have been pleased with the service and would use it again.
- Some of the benefits in using such programs are: saving money, since employers do not have to pay salary; and, having a free period of assessment without having to advertise for a new employee.
- Generally, in York and Peel Regions, employers do not use government programs. Some of them are not aware of such programs and for those who have used them they are too cumbersome (to much reporting and paper work, for which they do not have enough staff) and not always responsive (they have not found candidates with qualifications they were looking for). Employers have not had good experiences.

How would you describe your satisfaction level with the employee? What were your areas of concern and/or satisfaction?

- In general employers are pleased with the work of the immigrants they have hired. They are competent, pick up skills quickly and are productive. Sometimes new immigrants try hard to act like they think Canadians act, but they would perform best if they acted like themselves.
- Employers often have to advise new immigrants on the need to improve English language communication.
- Employees who attend ESL courses pay for themselves, or share the cost with their employer. Some employers do not encourage English classes during work time. However, after business hours is not always convenient for employees.
- School boards or private colleges are considered good sources of improving English language.
- In York, many immigrant employees live outside the Region. After hiring there are often emerging concerns about commuting to work, housing and pressures on families with only one car.
- Generally speaking companies are not very focussed on the concerns of the workers, but more on how well they do their job.

What supports would encourage you to hire (more) skilled immigrants into their first Canadian work experience?

Language and Business Culture Training for skilled immigrants

- Employers train employees to do a particular job but do not train them on corporate culture or how to adjust in a Canadian business environment. New immigrants need help with socialisation into the workplace and learning about Canadian business culture. New immigrants often stay together in groups at lunchtime or do not mingle with other employees.
- Outside training of employees is not as beneficial as providing training internally. It is best to have the organisation's leadership on board for internal training and mentoring programs. Employers support the idea that an ethnically diverse office can be the best-performing office.
- One employer appoints mentors to new hires to ensure they understand the work environment in Canada. The internal mentoring relationship is based on content (business area covered by the mentor) and the ethno-cultural community the skilled immigrants is from. They allocate portfolios to match employees to an immigrant business community, while also teaching them general business skills. The biggest issues that come up relate to knowing the language and understanding the cultural nuances of business interactions.

- Pre-hiring language training may be offered by school boards and training boards.
- Employers suggested that York Region and South Simcoe Training Board should do more than research.

Language and credential assessment and certification

- The government, or an appropriate agency, should check the credentials of prospective immigrants. Some companies will hire new immigrants if agencies could check foreign credentials and filter out clearly unqualified candidates (e.g. candidates with fabricated qualifications). Without agencies to vet good candidates, employers will insist on Canadian experience and qualifications.
- Employers would be more receptive to hiring immigrants if they were provided with Canadian equivalency of academic credentials and proof that the candidates were assessed for language and communication.
- Employers perceive that professional regulatory bodies (e.g. nurses, engineers, or doctors) need to have tools and mechanisms to facilitate the hiring of skilled immigrants. Regulators must encourage the entry of immigrants into their associations. Representatives from these organisations should participate in the debate on integration of immigrants.

Prior to arrival information on Canadian labour market

- Better information to prospective immigrants prior to arrival is necessary to understand the steps to accreditation (e.g. how to become a Certified Accountant (CA), or a Certified General Accountant (CGA)) and/or employment. New immigrants have misconceptions about the ease of integrating into the workforce; they do not understand these difficulties until they arrive.

Awareness and Diversity training for Canadian employers

- Canadian employers and employees should be offered training on understanding and appreciating the differences immigrants bring to the workplace. Employers need to improve their cross-cultural competence.
- Need for increased awareness that there are government-funded programs facilitating the entry of skilled immigrants into the workplace. Many employers do not know about the existence of such programs.

What type of financial incentives would encourage you to hire (more) skilled immigrants into their first Canadian work experience?

- Given the cost of training, employers need assurances that an employee will stay with them for at least two or three years.
- Government should provide a stipend to immigrants who participate in volunteer or co-op placements. Even immigrants with Canadian credentials face barriers because they lack Canadian work experience. New Canadians arrive in Canada with limited financial resources. They need support with childcare and/or transportation expenses while they are bringing their qualifications to Canadian standards.
- Employers must pay new immigrants a fair wage for their labour. If government wants to help, it can provide tax breaks or other incentives directly to employers.
- Employers should be given the option to choose from a variety of incentives (tax relief, training subsidy for employee, wage subsidy, access to an innovation fund) as opposed to using one program only.

Who should provide supports to help with recruitment, training, compensation, etc of new immigrant labour (e.g. federal, provincial, municipal, community programs or other)?

- Consulates should be used as a resource to validate professional and academic credentials of prospective immigrants.
- Community agencies must require validation of the certification and education of new immigrants prior to connecting them with employers.
- Private credential-checking services are efficient.
- Government should find out which referral services are doing a good job, and provide more resources to them.
- The three levels of government should co-operate to figure out how to validate the credentials of new immigrants. Certification provided by the University of Toronto or George Brown College is great, but they assess only academic qualifications. It does not indicate at which level a candidate will perform in their occupation.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Employers would like to see more immigrants in the workplace.
2. Supports and incentives are positive tools for employers when hiring skilled immigrants into their first work experience in Canada.
3. Government should do more to increase employer awareness of programs for employers who hire skilled immigrants.
4. The government should consult more often with employers.
5. HRSDC should assist employers directly with the hiring of skilled immigrants.
6. Business communication and language proficiency are two areas where employers think skilled immigrants need more training.
7. Employers should be given the option to choose from a variety of programs (based on their size and sector, employers can utilise different programs).
8. Intermediaries should be identified based on different functions and their relevant capacity and expertise.

Function	Intermediary
Dissemination of information to employers	Boards of Trade
Information to immigrants prior to arrival in Canada	Canadian embassies abroad
English language course	School boards and private colleges
Credential checking and evaluation	Government or agencies recognised by the government
Pre-hiring training (business communication, industry/province specific by-laws)	Training boards
Licensing	Professional regulatory bodies
Placement	Private employment agencies, community colleges

9. Immigrants should have their credentials and qualifications checked prior to being hired.
10. Government programs should be simple and easy for employers to use.
11. Regulatory bodies should be more involved in the integration of skilled immigrants in the labour market.
12. Immigrants should be given more information on the labour market in Canada prior to their arrival.

List of participating employers in the consultations

Toronto

Employers

FCI Broadband
NRI Industries
Bombardier Aerospace
BDC Consulting Group, Business Development Bank of Canada
CH2MHILL Canada Ltd.
Rosenberg Smith and Partners
Tremco
Armor Personnel
North American College

Community Agencies

Simpresions, Job Skills
H. & J. Associates
Job Skills

York

Advanced Machining
Electronic Ass'y and Test(2)
Civil Engineering and Design
Manufacturing
Printing and Graphic Design

Peel

Brampton Board of Trade
Mississauga Board of Trade